

Brief Summary of Benny Lewis' Presentation - CCFS-O

July 25th, 2014 At Knox Presbyterian Church

On a lovely Friday night in mid-summer Benny Lewis spoke to a full room with 60 people. His message is clear and unequivocal: adults can learn new languages and become sufficient fluent in 3 months. After just 3 months they will be able to travel and converse in the newly learned language. As evidence, in the past 10 years Benny has learned more than twelve languages, including Chinese.

In his presentation, Benny Lewis provided valuable tips for learning any language and many specific to learning Mandarin. One of his central tenants for learning any language is to start speaking the language from the first day and to speak it every day regardless of whether you are making mistakes. As you become more proficient with the language you can work at reducing the mistakes, and at expanding your capacity to include reading and writing. Another key tenant is immersion: putting yourself into an intense in-depth learning situation for three months and to work hard at the learning project.

Benny mentioned that technological advancement is making learning a language much easier than in the past. Mandarin can be learned from the internet, where many websites provide learning modules and exercises based on the level of the learner. Cell phone apps are another good way to learn Mandarin. There are many useful free apps such as Pleco Software, which can make the process of learning Mandarin much more convenient and easier. Moreover, people can get an on-line tutor from China without being in China for as little as \$5 per hour¹. Benny emphasized the importance of making a strong commitment to the learning of a language, committing the time and effort needed. If the commitment is made the learner can always find

enough the time to learn Mandarin, or any language. It is the matter of whether people will make the commitment and put in the effort.

Benny encouraged people to learn Mandarin, even if it is commonly believed that the Chinese language is a difficult language to learn. He provided useful tips to overcome difficulties westerners have in of learning Mandarin, such as the intonations of the Chinese language and writing Chinese characters. He noted that people often are concerned about not being able to hear the four intonationsⁱⁱ, which they often self diagnose as being “tone deaf”. However, Benny suggested that it is exceedingly rare for someone to be “tone deaf”. Every language has its own intonations; the learner simply has to make the effort to learn the Chinese tonality. He recommends the use of visual mnemonics, and took the audience through his amusing mnemonic for the word, “target”.

Critically, he strongly recommends that people should not be shy to speak Mandarin or any language they are learning. Rather he recommends that people take a proactive approach to speaking the language from the very first day, regardless of how many mistakes they make. You can and should make many mistakes as you can while speaking the language, because it is the way how we all learn a language. Happily in a conversation, someone who has Mandarin as a Mother tongue will typically be able to understand the language student due to the context of the conversation. In China as elsewhere in the world he has found that the local people are generally delighted when a foreigner tries to speak their language.

In terms of writing the Chinese characters, Benny suggested that so long as you know how to use PinYinⁱⁱⁱ computer software will allow you to write in Chinese. All that is required is to type the phonetic sounds into the computer or smart phone and it will produce the text in Chinese.

In summing up Benny stated to every language learner, “you can’t learn a language, you can live the language”.

ⁱ Because of the exchange rate of Canadian dollar and Chinese Yuan

ⁱⁱ There are four tones in Mandarin pronunciation, and they are the thumb of the rules in speaking the language.

ⁱⁱⁱ PinYin or HanYu PinYin is the phonetic system of transcribing the Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet. This phonetic system is created in the 1950s by Zhou Yongguang.